



It's Bar Month  
ALL MONTH LONG



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IN DINING



According to Eddie Osterland, Master Sommelier, creating a memorable experience has everything to do with "thinking like a somm."

## Think like a somm: Tips for taking special occasions from good to great

***"Bar Month" at OnMilwaukee.com is back for another round! The whole month of February, we're serving up intoxicatingly fun articles on bars and clubs – including guides, the latest trends, bar reviews and more. Grab a designated driver and dive in!***

Wine geeks might recognize the name Eddie Osterland. He was, after all, the first American to attain the Master Sommelier title in 1973, and is now one of fewer than 200 in the country.

And just to give you a sense of how big of a deal that is, less than 3% of test-takers pass the exam, and there are less than nine sommeliers worldwide who passed the Master's Exam on the very first try.

So, Osterland is pretty special. The fact is, if he were a wine, he'd be a grand vintage, fully mature but with plenty to offer for years to come. These days you'll most often find him on the speaking circuit sharing his knowledge about wine and entertaining with both new and seasoned executives.

In fact, his new book, "Power Entertaining," is a collection of his experiences and advice for building lasting relationships and using the art of wine and food to impress and attract friends and business associates.

I had the great honor of sitting down with him while he was in Milwaukee for a speaking engagement last week. We talked wine, relationships, and entertaining. And he gave me some great tips for creating memorable experiences, both at home and out in restaurants.

According to Osterland, creating a memorable experience has everything to do with "thinking like a somm."

Before I jump full swell into the details of our conversation, what exactly is a somm?

I like to think of the word "somm" as a term of endearment of sorts. The sommelier is typically a role found only in first-class restaurants

where the price of a bottle of wine can easily dwarf any sum spent on food. Sommeliers are on the front line of customer service and profit generation. These talented folks not only know wines, but they know people. If they work in a restaurant, they know how to give even the pickiest customers the best possible service and keep them coming back for more.

So, now that that's out of the way, it's time to start thinking like a somm.

Osterland, who studied professional wine tasting for two years at the University of Bordeaux, says the first step to being able to pull off an impressive affair with wine is to calm down. It doesn't really matter how much you know about wine.

"Don't stress out," he says. "You don't need to know everything. Make friends. Bond with the sommelier and your area wine merchant. Find out who the top ones are in your city. Get to know them, and find someone you like. Trust them."



A little bit of education helps as well.

"Go to a sommelier and say 'Burgundy me,'" Osterland suggests. "Sample the great wines you've never had before, and let it change your perspective."

Build a relationship with the sommelier. If you're planning an event, meet them for a conversation a few weeks ahead of time. Have a conversation over drinks at the bar. Ask them what they have that's not included on the wine list.

Once you've got the som on your side, you can start thinking about how to orchestrate a dinner that friends and business associates won't soon forget. Osterland emphasizes that, when you're pairing wines with foods, whether it's at a restaurant or at home, keep in mind that both taste best when you're hungry.

"No matter how much you like that lobster or scallop dinner, it's going to taste at least 8% better if you're hungry. Once that first item goes out, you have fifteen to thirty minutes to rock 'n roll. So, start with what really shines."

Osterland says it's a bit like the concept of "eat dessert first," and he follows up with the example of the legendary white, Château d'Yquem. Ranking among the top five white vineyards of France, Yquem is a highly regarded wine with ancient origins. He says it's unconventional, since it's typically seen as a dessert wine, but he suggests serving it first.

And when you're playing to impress, don't hesitate to spend a little bit more on those first sips of wine. Start big. Serve wines that turn their heads. You can get good drinking wines for \$10-\$14, but if you want to impress people, it's time to spend \$35 or more.

That's where your relationship with the sommelier comes in. Ask them for recommendations. And consider serving two different wines side by side so that people can compare them on the palate and learn more about what's good, and what they like.

And serve your wine at the proper temperature. Osterland says wine served too warm is the biggest offender.

"It's very frustrating and one of my longest pet peeves with the industry," he explains. "If you order a bowl of lobster bisque that is lukewarm, you send it back. If we sent back wines every time they were served wrong, we'd die of thirst. Only in one-tenth of one-tenth of restaurants are wines served at correct temperatures. When someone understands wine, it is an insult to serve red wine at room temperature."

Osterland recommends about 20 minutes in the fridge before serving for a red wine. Why? Colder temperatures bring out the sweetness of the wine, he says.

If you want to get specific, correct temperatures for wine lie somewhere between 60°F and 65°F for reds, and 50°F to 55°F for whites.

"Teach people something. If you do this on a consistent basis, people will automatically like you," he says. "There's a benefit to knowing you. You change the way they think, the way they do things."

Taking an interest in the food you order and serve to friends and business acquaintances also helps. Pulling people out of their comfort zones and giving them an experience they'll remember is priceless, Osterland explains. So, don't go with the expected, and don't play it safe. Skip the boring shrimp cocktail appetizer and do something more interesting.

"People like to hang out with foodies. Average people eat average things, but foodies are always on the cusp. Just kick it up a notch and people will respond to you."

When it comes to choosing wines to go with food, Osterland says it's about familiarizing yourself with what's available.

Don't choose the typical Chardonnay with cream sauce or the Cabernet with steak. Branch out. For instance, he says that one of the most underutilized food wines is a dry German Riesling, which is much less sweet than its counterparts and perfect with a number of dishes.

Another wine he recommends is an up-and-comer from Spain.

"Godello is like Chardonnay's stunt double. It's full bodied and delicious. Best of all, not everyone has heard of it, so you'll surprise your friends. And they'll thank you for it."

Osterland offers a host of tips in "Power Entertaining," including a list of some of the best wines for home entertaining under \$40 as well as hints and tips for artful food and wine pairing.

"Most wines go with most foods most of the time. But, food changes the wine, and the wine changes the food. You've got to taste them together."

Tasting wine with your food means sampling them together. As you chew your food, take in a small amount of the wine, and allow the flavors to mix. Observe how they play off of one another and how the flavors transform.

Osterland recommends rethinking the entire game of entertaining.

"Get a decanter," he says, "Not because of what it does for the wine, but because it will set you apart. It's about drama. It's about theater. No one else is doing it that way."

He also suggests investing in nice glassware. They really do affect the flavor of the wine, and they're not as breakable as most people think.

"Don't drink and dry. Use them today, wash them tomorrow," Osterland says with a smile.

He also recommends keeping a bottle or two of chilled Cava on hand at home for unexpected guests.

"Sparkling wine makes people feel special. Greet them with a glass of bubbly and you've taken your hospitality to a whole new level."

Ultimately, Osterland says you have to be willing to take your guests to a place they've never been before, and give them a memorable experience.

"The name of the game is the element of surprise. Do a head fake. Give them the unexpected."